



STATE OF MARYLAND

DHMH

Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene
Office of Health Care Quality
Bland Bryant Building • Spring Grove Center
55 Wade Avenue • Catonsville, Maryland 21228

To: All Nursing Homes

From: Carol Benner, Director, OHCQ

Date: February 20, 2004

Re: Gastroenteritis Outbreak and Precautions

The Office of Health Care Quality of DHMH is sending this informational alert to make Maryland Long Term Care facilities aware of the recent outbreak of gastroenteritis that has occurred in several hospitals in the greater Baltimore area in the past week. The following overview of recent events at one of those facilities, provided by the Community Health Administration of DHMH, is presented to highlight the characteristics of such an outbreak.

The Baltimore City Health Department received on Feb 11, 2004, a report of multiple cases of illness at one facility. At that time a moderate number of patients and employees were ill with diarrhea, vomiting, stomach/abdominal cramps, nausea, fever (100-102.7°F), headache, chills, and muscle aches. Affected individuals were from common geographic areas of the facility. Duration of illness was approximately 24-48 hours.

On each of the subsequent two days, DHMH was notified of additional cases of GE illness among patients and staff. By the close of the second day, more than 80 cases of patients and staff had been reported.

Case finding was facilitated by the centralized collection of information and case line listing by the facility ICP. Control measures, recommended by DHMH and the local health department, were instituted early in the outbreak. These included contact precautions for affected patients, extensive environmental cleansing, exclusion of sick staff for 72 hours beyond symptoms, cohorting of patients and staff, and strict hand cleansing procedures (washing and use of alcohol based sanitizer).

Viral and enteric stool specimens were collected and processed in the DHMH lab. Test results on some of these specimens show the presence of norovirus (Norwalk-like agent). Other testing is still in progress.

Epidemiologists from the Baltimore City Health Department and DHMH are continuing to work closely with the hospital and are carefully monitoring the situation there and in other facilities.

Based on clinical, epidemiological, and laboratory evidence, the outbreak agent has been preliminarily identified as a norovirus (also known as "Norwalk-like agent"). Additional information about this pathogen can be found through the website of the Centers for Disease Prevention and Control (CDC) at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/revb/gastro/norovirus.htm>.

Norovirus infections usually cause self-limited diarrheal illness in persons who are generally healthy. However, elderly and fragile residents in a long-term care facility can be at risk of more serious health consequences. **It is thus imperative that staff in each long-term care facility be aware of the possible presence of this virus in the general community, that the virus can be easily spread via the fecal-oral route, and that an outbreak can rapidly affect large numbers of patients and staff. Rapid emphasis of control measures, such as the close attention to hand washing, is imperative to limit the extent of an outbreak. Appropriate precautions should be in place to prevent spread from ill residents and staff to others. Outbreaks should be promptly reported to the local health department.**

Further recommendations about cases or outbreaks of gastroenteritis can be found in the DHMH "Guidelines for Epidemiological Investigation of Gastroenteritis in Long-Term Care Facilities." These Guidelines are available at the DHMH website: <http://www.edcp.org/guidelines/ge96.html>. Please note the section on Outbreak Management.

For other information, contact OHCQ Medical Director, Dr. Joseph Berman, at 410-402-8007.

WK/kw

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